

Miss Lou celebrates her 86th birthday with a bang

By Neil Armstrong

Jamaica's cultural ambassador, Dr. Louise Bennett-Coverley, affectionately known as "Miss Lou", has been keeping the oral tradition alive since she was 13 years old. She is Jamaica's first lady of folklore, an internationally acclaimed performer, writer and lecturer. Miss Lou celebrated her 86th birthday with a bang yesterday at her Scarborough home. There was a five-city cake-cutting celebration carried live on Power 106, heard in Toronto, London, New York, South Florida and Kingston. People's Telecom Jamaica also relaunched its Ms. Lou calling club, a calling card similar to the Oliver Samuels card. September 7 was declared Miss Lou Day in Jamaica in 2003.

Although retired, there is still a demand for her appearance at various events, and she will tell you that she has retired tired. She is now concentrating on writing her memoirs - a project that she has been thinking about for sometime now. People like African-American singer and civil-rights activist Harry Belafonte and poet Maya

her work. She is the subject of many research papers at universities throughout the world. In the introduction to Miss Lou's book, *Jamaica Labrish*, professor Rex Nettleford, former vice-chancellor of the University of the West Indies, writes: "It must not be forgotten that

probably by the one literate person in each yard. Many listened. Today her poems are "recited" by many school children who give the dramatic monologues new interpretations and even new sounds, and many more are listening."

In the 1940s Miss Lou



Miss Lou with Jamaica's Pulse model Nadine Willis. She was in Toronto on a one day work appointment and visited the Jamaican icon at her home in Scarborough.

Louise Bennett wrote many of her poems for performance and even those published weekly in the Sunday *Gleaner* throughout the 40s were read in tenement yards all over the country -

wrote a regular column of Anansi stories in the Sunday *Gleaner*, which became very popular.

These were stories passed down to her by her grandmother, Meme. "I got

most of my stories from my grandmother, Meme, who would tell stories at recess time and lunch time. I used to fall asleep every night in Meme's lap just to hear the Anansi story. Every story had a little song somewhere. Many nights I went to bed singing an Anansi song." According to Miss Lou, when telling Anansi stories, "Your whole body has to take up the story, yuh know."

In describing Miss Lou's storytelling techniques, Laura Tanna in her book *Jamaican Folk Tales and Oral Histories*, writes, "Often on the Ring Ding show, and periodically on short clips used as fillers, television viewers saw Miss Lou performing Anansi stories in her own particular style with eyes open wide in wonderment, hands held high as she gesticulates, her patois flying so fast from her tongue that one can scarcely keep up with the story until hearing the proverb she usually includes before her cheerful laugh punctuates the conclusion." Miss Lou did a television show for children from 1970 to 1982 on the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation (JBC). She

explains the history of Anansi - the trickster and the folk hero. "He was the only hero. My grandmother used to say he was a trickified little spider man but rememba you caan be like Anansi yuh nuh because Anansi is a magic person. You caan be like Anansi but you can enjoy the Anansi story. Anansi is the only folk hero, story hero that makes himself also the villain because he points out the weakness of the human being and show you how you can be tricked by your own greed or envy because you don't examine what you're doing properly."

Miss Lou is the consummate storyteller. When you're in her presence, you're thoroughly engaged in her stories. The call-and-response of the stories seeps into your pores and you become a part of her infectious laughter. Laughter is medicine for Miss Lou and storytelling is her forte. Today we celebrate the birthday of a master storyteller - Louise Bennett-Coverley, a wordsmith who continues to spread her ancestral wisdom. Happy 86th birthday Miss Lou.

